

## **Circle of Mercy Sermon**

**Luke 4:18-30: *Healer, Heal Thyself***

**Hillary Brownsmith**

**January 31, 2016**

Luke 4 is a snapshot, a microcosm of Jesus' whole life. Luke 4 is intense, riddled with both highs and lows of Jesus' ministry. At the beginning of the chapter Christ spends forty days in the desert without food being tempted by the adversary. In the middle we have tonight's story in which Christ presents his mission in his home synagogue only to be threatened with death. By the end of the chapter we're back in the desert where, after a successful preaching and healing tour, he is being groped and hemmed in by adoring followers.

Luke 4 is one of those chapters that manages to get at multiple truths about what Jesus' ministry was and who it was for in the span of a couple pages. And tonight's story manages to get at something about Jesus the person.

But before we get to Jesus the person, it's worth talking about what Jesus' reading of Isaiah means for his mission and ours. I'm going to read that portion of tonight's text one more time from a slightly different version:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because of this the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; and he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, and to proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind; to strengthen with forgiveness those who are bruised and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

*-Luke 4:18-19 (George M. Lamsa's Translation from the Aramaic of the Peshitta)*

Jesus, in reading this passage, is proclaiming material release from imprisonment and the soothing of emotional and spiritual pain. Release for the captive and healing for the heartbroken. He is prohibiting us from spiritualizing his mission for liberation while acknowledging that emotional wounds exist. It's our temptation to choose between these two missions, to flatten the work of Christ.

But Jesus is pulling from a prophetic tradition that is always reflecting on the Exodus story, an enslavement and release. Remember that in the account of this story in Matthew's gospel, right after Jesus leaves the desert and before he heads home to preach, he hears about his cousin John's arrest. Jesus knows what imprisonment does to families. Jesus knows what it's like to be surrounded on all sides by a police force protecting other people's interests.

One of the risks of faith, notes James Cone, is to make decisions about human liberation now without being totally sure what Jesus would do. We have to read the text and discern where Jesus might stand now on any number of issues and injustices. But if we read this text it's hard not to hear Jesus saying to the over 2 million persons in our prison system "I want you out. I want you free. The children of God don't belong in cages." Jesus must be saying to undocumented folks in this country "I don't want you in

a detention center. I don't want ICE to put hands on you. And this love affair with arbitrary, government-created borders has to end because they are keeping too many people from their freedom."

Christ is about material liberation. And so are we. But he is not only about material liberation. Christ is here for the brokenhearted, the bruised. And we know those things are tied. The systems of oppression wound. In our woundedness we perpetuate these systems. We judge where everybody stands in relation to the system. It's a cycle. And Christ is here to stop that whole cycle. He's not just going to deal with personal spiritual awakening or personal salvation. He's also not just going to focus on social justice.

And since the Spirit is also on us, the priesthood of all believers, we too must be about stopping the whole cycle. But how? Who has that kind of stamina? Who has the emotional fortitude? How does Jesus keep working for total human liberation when he has been starved and taunted in the desert, rejected in his home synagogue and almost killed, begun his mission knowing that he now has no home to go back to, accepted that his cousin who just baptized him is in jail and facing death, and lose all anonymity making travel difficult? How does he do it?

We don't ask this particular question a lot. I guess because we understand that God made Christ for this work. But we are also made for this human liberation project, this loving one another as ourselves work. There must be some instruction about how we too can faithfully engage in this work sustainably, without burning out. There must be a word about how we too can simply walk through a crowd bent on our destruction without fighting or freezing or breaking into sprint. I know I need that word.

I think if we ask the question "How does Jesus remain so resilient?" chapter 4 of Luke lends us a lot of answers. The first line in chapter 4 is "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led into the wilderness for forty days..." Jesus is filled with the Spirit and the memory of his recent baptism, the vision of the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove, the experience of standing in the river as the words "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" are spoken over him. Jesus undergoes temptation, rejection, and endless days of preaching and healing with this resource binding him together, sustaining him. We need resources too. We need experiences we can call on to carry us. Maybe it's our baptism or God speaking to us. Maybe it's smaller.

I know that personally I struggle a lot with the idea that I'll never be able to do enough. It loops in my head and it gets worse when I am faced with big projects. When I slip into that loop the only thing that can pull me out is the memory of a time when I could do enough. Because my brains seems to like this bad messaging so much I don't have a whole day or even an afternoon that I can call up. Instead I remember reading a short book to Hosea before bed...just a couple of minutes. He was content and still. It was warm in the room. I remember the way his hair smelled as he leaned back against me. The way he flipped each page before resting his little hand back on mine. The way he smiled on his favorite

page. The sound of his breathing almost undetectable under my voice, reading sing-songy a book I have read probably 300 times. In that moment I was doing exactly enough. When that "you can't do enough" comes back I have this resource. It's vivid and totally engrossing because I have fleshed out of every sensory detail. I need it that much.

Maybe when Jesus was out on that cliff, an angry crowd of familiar faces surrounding him, he had his resource. He's in the Jordan, cool water streaming down his face after slipping under the surface for a moment. A hot breeze whips against his skin. John is there, still free and maybe smelling like locusts and honey. He sees the dove. A voice booms in his ears "You are my beloved son with who I am well pleased". And he steps onto the bank ready, knowing who he is. It doesn't matter that these people aren't pleased. It doesn't matter that they don't know who he is. He had a resource big enough to move through all that.

We need internal resources to do this stressful human liberation work. We also need the external resource of companionship. We need community that's supportive, that believes us when we say who we know we are. Christ, like all prophets, is not acceptable in his hometown. So he goes to a synagogue in another town where people are astonished by his teaching; and then he calls disciples to work with him, people he will one day call friends. He tries to surround himself with people who will affirm his work and his identity. We must also do this.

Lastly, I think we can't spend enough time grappling with the proverb "physician, heal thyself".

This usage of "physician, heal thyself" is really clunky. This is a Greek proverb that means exactly what you think it would mean, "Instead of pointing to everybody else's problems, why don't you deal with your own stuff?" Using it to ask Jesus to heal people in his home town like he did in Capernaum is weird. But as I read this passage, I found myself wondering if the awkwardness was intentional, like it's pulling your attention there. Because this parable, in large part, is the answer to how you sustain yourself in the work for human liberation. You heal yourself. You work on yourself. You accept that there will be times when you are heartbroken, when you'll need to slip away to pray or have a meal away from the masses or do a thing that will be so wonderful you'll be able to use it as a resource.

If we are going to work for other folks healing and liberation, we must be concerned about our own health. If we're going to read Isaiah's words, proclaim healing for the heartbroken, we have to believe that we too deserve that restoration. We have to read the text, taking the risk of faith to believe that because Jesus was interested in the heartbroken in Capernaum, he is interested in the mending of your heart now. If you can't quite accept this idea because you're about peace and justice and what's going on out there, we can frame this differently. This is emotional justice work. If you don't do the work on yourself, to recover from traumas and losses and everyday stress, you won't be prepared to proclaim good news to the poor or release to the captive.

We look to Jesus for guidance about how to be a peacemaker, a justice seeker, an oppression un-doer.

It's time that we start looking to Jesus' life for guidance about how to be emotionally resilient. We have before us a person who was indeed the Son of God, made for the liberation of all. But this Liberator also had a body and was a human. And that human had to learn how to be strong and recover in the face of so much.

Christ is a breathtaking example of resiliency. Following Christ means learning how to model and teach that same resiliency. We are called to heal the heartbroken and that healing, that emotional justice work begins in each of us.